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Not Masters but Stewards of the Earth

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Not Masters but Stewards of the Earth

Abstract

"We are not servants of the earth but of the creator and Master of the earth, God."

Posting about the beliefs of the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/not-masters-but-stewards-of-the-earth/>

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Comments

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in things

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Not Masters but Stewards of the Earth

Dave Schelhaas

I asked in my previous article what it was about climate change that upset a significant number of Christians.

According to Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “the secular-dominated environmental movement sees human beings as the problems to climate change,” and this worldview “denies the purpose of creation, which was for humans to take dominion over it” (as quoted in Bailey).

Mohler’s reference to dominion corresponds with that of the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, a deceptively named Christian organization that promotes a free market approach to the stewardship of creation. It also evokes memories of the Lynn White thesis of the late 1960s.

In 1966, historian Lynn White gave a speech at an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) convention (published in *Science* in 1967) titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.” White suggested that the Judeo-Christian belief that humans are created in God’s image and called to subdue and have dominion over the rest of creation has led to an ecological crisis in the world. How humans treat the rest of creation, said White, depends upon how they view the creation in relation to themselves, and he asserted that since the Industrial Revolution, humans have used science and technology to exploit and abuse the natural world for their “slightest whim.”

The speech and article had a huge effect on the scientific community and, more specifically, on the Christian scientific community. Eventually, other academic domains and the general public became familiar with the “Lynn White thesis.” I am sure that some science teachers today, fifty years after White’s article was published, continue to discuss Lynn White’s thesis with their students.

White himself was a Christian but for some Christian theologians and scientists, he became the enemy, and they responded with strident defenses of the biblical call to “subdue” and have “dominion.” Another more biblical response by Christian scientists, however, was to recognize that the call to “have dominion” in Genesis 1 had to be informed by the call in Genesis 2 to “work and take care of” the creation. They noted that God took pleasure in his creation, that it was God’s love for the *world* which caused him to send Christ to this world and through him, as Paul writes in Colossians, “to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” They argued that dominion meant unfolding the potential of the earth, not exploiting it for economic gain.

But the Cornwall Alliance argues that we are called by scripture to subdue and have dominion over the earth, and it uses this belief as its biblical basis for denying the reality of climate change.

The Cornwall Alliance, originally the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, was founded in 2005 to silence evangelical leaders who were sympathetic to the climate change movement. That is almost forty years after Lynn White, yet its emphasis on the need for humans to have dominion over earth and subdue it is still at the heart of its campaign; Cornwall uses it to debunk the very notion of climate change and human complicity in it. The word “dominion” appears again and again in its website position papers, always as a positive descriptor of man’s role in the creation. Christians are called to care for the poor, and the best way to help the poor, says Cornwall, is through modern economic development fueled by oil and coal. They say that policies to reduce greenhouse gasses “will harm the poor more than others because the poor spend a higher percentage of their income on energy and desperately need economic growth to rise out of poverty and overcome its miseries.”

The Cornwall Alliance is so committed to dominion and development that they believe wildness and wilderness to be undesirable. Subduing and cultivating, they say, should always be the goal. For example, one of the stated principles in the

Cornwall Alliance website reads as follows: “We deny that godly human dominion entails humans being servants rather than masters of the Earth.”

This statement, in addition to being an example of the fallacy called “either-or” argumentation, gives us two choices—neither of which accurately depict the position of historic Christianity. One problem with the statement is that it implies that humans are called to be *masters* of the earth. A better and much more biblical word would be *stewards* since God is the master of the earth and of the entire universe. A second problem is that the word *servants* suggests that the alternative to being masters of the earth is to be its servants. In reality, we are not servants of the earth but of the creator and Master of the earth, God.

The Cornwall perception of humans as masters of creation brings to light a glaring contradiction in two of their most basic principles. On the one hand, they insist that “earth and its ecosystems . . . are robust, resilient, self-regulating and self-correcting.” From this they conclude that humans interfere in God’s business when they seek to slow down climate change. No human stewardship is required or even permitted in that part of the creation.

Representative Tim Walberg (R-Mich.), a graduate of Wheaton College, echoes this belief: “As a Christian, I believe that there is a creator God who is much bigger than us. And I’m confident that, if there’s a real problem, he can take care of it” (as quoted by Bailey). How can any Christian endowed by God with an intellect and able to look at scripture and the world make such a statement? Of course, God can take care of anything, but as scripture shows us again and again, he has appointed humans to tend and care for the earth. He has appointed humans to do justice in the world. He has appointed humans through the “foolishness of preaching” to make disciples of all nations. It is unbiblical to hide behind the sentiment of “God can take care of it.”

On the one hand, then, these “hands off” people say “let God take care of it,” but on the other hand, they insist that human dominion is absolutely necessary in the area of economics. They argue that God needs us to develop all-natural resources—especially fossil fuel energy sources—and use them to their fullest extent for economic development that will (they assert) diminish poverty in the world.

Why is human participation required in one domain and forbidden in the other? It makes no sense.

And here's another flaw in the positions of the Cornwall Alliance: While it acknowledges the fact that humans are fallen and therefore prone to greed and abuse, it seems unconcerned by the fact that humans, usually in the name of economic development, are willing to compromise the environment so that aquifers are polluted, soil depleted and coral reefs destroyed. When the Cornwall Alliance expresses a concern about environmental problems, it blames them primarily on *primitive* agricultural. One sees virtually no concern about the large-scale depredation of the natural world caused by the modern industrial complex, effects such as soil erosion, air pollution, ocean acidification, desertification, and species elimination.

Now, you might be wondering what harm can this small, loosely organized Cornwall Alliance really do? I will try to answer that question in the third part of this study.